



Effective Instructional Practice:

Using Instructor Power Effectively

Melissa F. Tindage, California State University, Los Angeles

Power is conceptualized as an individual's ability to influence another person to action (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984). In the classroom, instructor power use is considered central to effective teaching because "if a teacher does not exert influence in a classroom, that teacher cannot enhance student learning" (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984, p. 125). The exertion of power is one instructor behavior that is omnipresent within the classroom (Hurt, Scott, & McCroskey, 1978). What this means that at any point of time during instruction, you will exercise a form of power in the classroom. The five types of power you use in the classroom are coercive power, legitimate power, reward power, referent power, and expert power (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983; Roach, Richmond, & Mottet, 2006).

Coercive power stems from students' perceptions that instructors are able to punish or remove positive elements from them. *Legitimate power* stems from the assigned role that instructors possess. *Reward power* stems from students' perceptions that instructors can reward them or remove negative elements from them. *Referent power* stems from the relationships that students develop with their instructors, and students' desires to identify with and please them. *Expert power* stems from students' perceptions that their instructors are competent and knowledgeable about the specific subject area they are teaching. These five types of power can be separated into two categories of power: prosocial power and antisocial power (Richmond, 1990). Prosocial power includes the use of referent power, reward power, and expert power, whereas

antisocial power includes the use of coercive power and legitimate power (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011; Richmond & McCroskey, 1984).

Using power effectively in the classroom is important for three reasons. First, instructor power use has both positive and negative consequences for student learning (Richmond, 1990; Richmond & McCroskey, 1984). For instance, when instructors use prosocial power (i.e., referent, reward, and expert), students' report higher levels of cognitive learning, affective learning, and state motivation. When instructors use antisocial power (i.e., coercive, legitimate), students' report lower levels of cognitive learning, affective learning, and state motivation. Second, the types of power that instructors utilize influences students' perceptions of them. Students perceive instructors as credible, confirming, understanding, and "better" when they use prosocial power (Finn, 2012; Teven & Herring, 2005; Schrodtt, Witt, & Turman, 2007; Turman & Schrodtt, 2006).

Third, students' communication with their instructors differs based on the type of power instructors use in the classroom. Students report being more motivated to communicate with their instructors for relational, functional, and participatory reasons when these instructors use prosocial power; they report being more motivated to communicate with their instructors for excuse-making and sycophantic reasons when these instructors use antisocial power (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011). Furthermore, students indicate that they use more prosocial influence messages when their instructors use prosocial power, whereas they use more antisocial influence messages when their instructors use antisocial power (Golish & Olson, 2000).

Five Tips on Using Instructor Power in the Classroom

1. Because your use of power can have both positive and negative influences on student learning, you should strive to limit your use of antisocial power (i.e., coercive power, legitimate power) and increase your use of prosocial power (i.e., referent power, reward power, and expert power) in the classroom.

2. As the number of international students in U.S. classrooms increases (Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008; Zhang, 2007), it is important for you to be able to navigate the communication challenges that may arise between you and these students. To do so, you can increase your understanding of how students from various cultural backgrounds respond to instructors' use of power. For instance, in France, students report higher levels of cognitive learning when instructors use coercive power (Roach, Cornett-DeVitto, & DeVitto, 2005). In Germany, students report low levels of cognitive learning when instructors use referent power (Roach & Byrne, 2001). Because your classroom may include international students, you should not altogether stop using antisocial power bases or start using only prosocial power bases. However, you should be aware that, at times, using coercive power may increase student learning and using referent power may decrease student learning.

3. Students and instructors may differ in their perceptions about the type of power instructors exert most in the classroom. For instance, students have reported that instructors use coercive power more and expert power at a lesser rate instructors believe they do (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983). To ensure that you and your students' share similar perceptions of your power use, pay attention to the reasons why your students communicate with you as reasons may indirectly be related to your use of particular power bases (e.g., Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011).

4. For many students, their use of power in the classroom is linked to the type of power their instructors use (Golish & Olson, 2000). Should you desire to have your students use more prosocial influence messages when interacting with you, you will want to increase your use of prosocial power. For instance, if you acknowledge your students for doing well on an assignment (i.e., reward power), you may find that your students reward you by working diligently on future assignments.

5. Your students' perceptions of your credibility are also connected to your power use (Teven & Herring, 2005). To positively influence your classroom credibility, learn your students name to indicate that you care about them (i.e., referent power), write your students letters of recommendation for future jobs (i.e., reward power), or share current information about the subject matter you are teaching with your students (i.e., expert power).

Assessing Your Use of Instructor Power

To assess your use of instructor power, do so by completing either the 30-item Teacher Power Use Scale (Schrodt et al., 2007) or the 20-item Power Base Measure (Roach, 1995).

References

- Finn, A. N. (2012). Teacher use of prosocial and antisocial power bases and students' perceived instructor understanding and misunderstanding in the college classroom. *Communication Education, 61*, 67-79.
doi:10.1080/03634523.2011.636450
- Golish, T. D., & Olson, L. N. (2000). Students' use of power in the classroom: An investigation of student power, teacher power, and teacher immediacy.

- Communication Quarterly*, 48, 293-310. doi:10.1080/01463370009385598
- Goodboy, A. K., & Bolkan, S. (2011). Student motives for communicating with instructors as a function of perceived instructor power use. *Communication Research Reports*, 28, 109-114. doi:10.1080/08824096.2011.541368
- Hurt, H. T., Scott, M. D., & McCroskey, J. C. (1978). *Communication in the classroom*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- McCroskey, J. C., & Richmond, V. P. (1983). Power in the classroom I: Teacher and student perceptions. *Communication Education*, 32, 175-184.
doi:10.1080/03634528309378527
- Richmond, V. P. (1990). Communication in the classroom: Power and motivation. *Communication Education*, 39, 181-195. doi:10.1080/03634529009378801
- Richmond, V. P., & McCroskey, J. C. (1984). Power in the classroom II: Power and learning. *Communication Education*, 33, 125-136.
doi:10.1080/03634528409384729
- Roach, K. D. (1995). Teaching assistant argumentativeness and perceptions of power use in the classroom. *Communication Research Report*, 12, 94-103.
doi:10.1080/08824099509362044
- Roach, K. D., & Byrne, P. R. (2001). A cross-cultural comparison of instructor communication in American and German classrooms. *Communication Education*, 50, 1-14. doi:10.1080/03634520109379228
- Roach, K. D., Cornett-DeVito, M. M., & DeVito, R. (2005). A cross-cultural comparison of instructor communication in American and French classrooms. *Communication Quarterly*, 53, 87-107. doi:10.1080/01463370500056127

- Roach, K. D., Richmond, V. P., Mottet, T. P. (2006). Teachers' influence message. In T. P. Mottet, V. P. Richmond, & J. C. McCroskey (Eds.), *Handbook of instructional communication: Rhetorical and relational perspectives* (pp. 117-139). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Schrodt, P., Witt, P. L., & Turman, P. D. (2007). Reconsidering the measurement of teacher power use in the college classroom. *Communication Education, 56*, 308-332. doi:10.1080/03634520701256062
- Teven, J. J., & Herring, J. E. (2005). Teacher influence in the classroom: A preliminary investigation of perceived instructor power, credibility, and student satisfaction. *Communication Research Reports, 22*, 235-246. doi:10.1080/00036810500230685
- Turman, P. D., & Schrodt, P. (2006). Student perceptions of teacher power as a function of perceived teacher confirmation. *Communication Education, 55*, 265-279. doi:10.1080/03634520600702570
- Wadsworth, B. C., Hecht, M. L., & Jung, E. (2008). The role of identity gaps, discrimination, and acculturation in international students' educational satisfaction in American classrooms. *Communication Education, 57*, 64-87. doi:10.1080/03634520701668407
- Zhang, Q. (2007). Teacher misbehaviors as learning demotivators in college classrooms: A cross-cultural investigation in China, Germany, Japan, and the United States. *Communication Education, 56*, 209-227. doi:10.1080/03634520601110104